MEDICAL NUMISMATIC NOTES, XV: SOME MEDICAL ASPECTS OF GREEK AND ROMAN COINS*

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SINCE any discussion of Greek and Roman medicine should open with a bow to Hippocrates or Galen it would be fitting to begin this essay with the statement that Galen was the first to describe coin lesions of the lungs. Unfortunately, because of the medium required for the demonstration of such lesions, not even the remarkable extensibility of lung tissue would cover such an anachronism.

Greek and Roman coins demonstrate a great variety of medical and medically related subjects. Hippocrates, strange as it may seem, is not a popular subject. He appears on few coins, one of the more fitting examples being a Coan coin of 55 B.C.[8-24†] Much better off is the god of medicine, Aesculapius, who is represented in many forms on a large number of coins from a broad variety of cities, states, and regions.

Before becoming a divinity Aesculapius achieved great fame as a practicing physician. Ultimately he suffered an attack of *hubris*, a condition not unknown among medical men down through the centuries, and was led into the great error of raising one of his patients from the dead. Retaliation was quick and Olympian. Pluto, god of the underworld, who was the immediate loser in this negative population growth, protested at once to his superior brother, Zeus. Zeus responded by hurling a low and inside thunderbolt at Aesculapius who, as a result, suffered for the rest of his life from a shortened leg. This condition is shown on a bronze coin from Hadrianapolis minted during the reign of Alexander Severus (222-235 A.D.).[2-4]

The prescription for raising a patient from the dead at that time consisted of a potion which had Gorgonian blood as its main compo-

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†Reference superscripts are composed in most cases of the number of the reference joined by a hyphen to the number of the figure in that reference work.

nent. The face of Medusa, the most famous of the three sisters, is depicted as almost overflowing a striking coin.[8-10] Unhappily the useful fluid involved is no longer obtainable either generically or under the original label.

Aesculapius usually appears in the traditional form of a distinguished middle-aged or elderly individual. A few examples of him as a young man exist, a good one being on a tetradrachm from Zakynthos.[2-6] The god of medicine achieved his greatest popularity on coins during the reigns of Commodus (180-192 A.D.) and Caracalla (211-217 A.D.). If Aesculapius had had his choice of emperors he probably would have disapproved of both.

Although most of the members of Aesculapius' family are less famous than he, several appear on coins. His wife, Epione, is shown on an early coin,[8-13] on which she is presumably pouring medicine from a vial into a mixing bowl. An alternative suggestion, which takes into account her husband's many travels and great involvement in cultic activities, is that she is mixing herself a good strong drink.

The best known younger member of the family is a daughter, Hygeia. She usually appears with her father (e.g., a bronze coin[2-17] from Hadrianapolis at the time of Antoninus Pius, 138-161 A.D.). The Romans had a happy knack for bringing their gods down to earth by combining representations of deities and earthly rulers. A bronze coin[2-31] from Pergamon (165 A.D.) shows Marcus Aurelius as Aesculapius and his wife Faustina as not Epione, but Hygeia.

A lesser-known but intriguing member of the family is Telesphoros, who started out as a local divinity around Pergamon and later became assimilated as a son of Aesculapius. The Greek word, telesphoreo, has the basic meaning of bringing to a head, completing; hence it easily came to include the concept of convalescence. Telesphoros, therefore, was the divinity of convalescence, the son who completed the work of his father, the god of medicine. Telesphoros (Figure 1) is easily identified by his pointed mantle and generally hooded demeanor. He appears on Pergamene coins from the time of Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), and his circulation was substantially increased in the third century when he received credit for ending an outbreak of pestilence in Athens. A charming brother-and-sister combination, Hygeia and Telesphoros, appear on a bronze coin[2-20] from Hierapolis. Other groupings of members of the family are also extant.

Fig. 1. Telesphoros, an assimilated son of Aesculapius, who served as the divinity of convalescence. Reproduced by permission from Bernhard, O.: Ueber Heilgötter auf Griechischen und Römischen Münzen. *Schweiz. Med. Wschr. 55*:258-64, 1925, Figure 18 (a bronze coin from Nicaea).

In 214 A.D. Caracalla made a state visit to Pergamon, and a coin[8-25] of that time shows the emperor saluting the serpent of Aesculapius with Telesphoros looking on, mantled in appropriate dignity. State visits are usually processions of solemn character. However, Caracalla's trip to Pergamon loses a little of this atmosphere according to one commentator who stated that the emperor's real motive was a last-ditch effort to free himself from one of the venereal diseases.

Greek and Roman divinities are brought together on a Roman gold coin (200 A.D.) that portrays both Aesculapius and Salus.[14-2] Salus, as an indigenous Roman goddess of health, plays an interesting role in the assimilation of medical aspects of the two civilizations. A silver denarius[3-1] of the Roman Republic has Salus on the obverse and Valetudo on the reverse. Valetudo was the Roman counterpart of Hygeia, but she gradually declined as Salus increased her scope and eventually took over related attributes, including care of the Aesculapian serpent.

Salus was a popular divinity for many years. Livia, the wife of Augustus, appeared on a bronze coin[2-30] as Salus. One of the more fascinating numismatic appearances she made was in the bisexual form of a gynecomastic Aesculapius on a coin[7-9] minted about 260 A.D.

Occasionally one coin will include several medical aspects. Such a coin[8-38] from Berytus in Phoenicia shows Eshmun-Aesculapius, a transitional compound of the Phoenician and Greek divinities. Not only are these two strands woven together, but Aesculapius is shown wearing the Phrygian cap, which calls to mind the deformity of the gallbladder that has been given this name.

Many divine attributes appear on coins. The Aesculapian staff is depicted in a wide variety of shapes and situations; the first known Aesculapian coin,[8-14] minted at Larissa between 450 and 400 B.C., shows the staff. The city of Cos eventually took over the Aesculapian staff as its municipal device. Serpents are not always creeping creatures; a copper coin[2-9] from Nicaea demonstrates a flying staff, perhaps the symbol of an early disaster relief team. Another serpent in a hurry is shown on horseback on a coin[1-161] of the time of Caracalla from Lydian Philadelphia (Figure 2).

The Aesculapian serpent was a powerful symbol of medical success, and at least one con man took advantage of this symbolism. Alexandros of Abonuteichos had domesticated a large serpent, for which he designed a cloth head with movable jaws.[22] The serpent, professionally known as Glycon, was supposedly a reincarnation of Aesculapius himself. Upon receipt of fitting sums of acceptable coins Glycon would make oracular statements in response to his questioners. A Nicomedian copper coin (217 A.D.) depicts this human-headed Aesculapian serpent.[1-82]

The Roman Senate was usually a practical body, and when Rome suffered from a severe plague in 291 B.C. the Senate sent a band of

Fig. 2. An Aesculapian serpent moving a little more quickly than usual. Reproduced by permission from Bernhard, O.: *Griechische und Römische Münzbilder in ihren Beziehungen zur Geschichte der Medizin.* Zürich, Füssli, 1926, Figure 161.

nine men to Epidaurus to request aid from one of the most powerful sources of the Aesculapian cult. The temple priests assigned one of the Aesculapian serpents to the Roman group, and all made the long trip back on shipboard. As the ship was moving up the Tiber the serpent snaked overboard, swam to a nearby island, and moved ashore. A temple was built on the spot, and the remains can still be seen.[11, 7] A coin[20-54] from the time of Antoninus Pius shows this historic scene in some detail (Figure 3). The galley is seen approaching two arches of the Pons

Fig. 3. An Aesculapian serpent arriving at Rome during the plague of 291 B.C. This is one of the most attractive ancient coins with medical interest. Reproduced by permission from Sutherland, C. H. V.: *Art in Coinage: The Aesthetics of Money from Greece to the Present Day.* New York, Philosophical Library, 1956, Figure 54.

Fabricius (now the Ponte Quattro Capi); the erect serpent is on the prow, the god of the Tiber is comfortably reclining and making welcoming gestures, and the Aventine Hill looms in the background. This is a beautiful example of the coin-designer's art.

When Aesculapius and his agents were not traveling they usually dwelt in substantial and often impressive buildings. A bronze coin[2-24] of Nikopolis (c. 230 A.D.) exhibits one of these temples, and a Pergamene coin[8-17] shows three different varieties (Figure 4). These Aesculapian temples often served as rudimentary medical schools. It is ironic in this time of staggering cuts in federal funds for medical educa-

Fig. 4. Three Aesculapian temples on a coin from Pergamon. Reproduced by permission from Hart, G.: Ancient coins and medicine. *Canad. Med. Ass. J. 94*:77-89, 1966, Figure 17(c).

tion to see a medical school depicted on a coin. It would be far better to have the coins in the schools rather than the schools on the coins.

The temples had their secret rooms and areas, which were usually kept locked. Symbolic keys were exhibited in processions honoring Aesculapius, and at least one of these keys was pictured on a coin.[8-18]

As the religious and political tides of the Roman Empire ebbed and flowed the Aesculapian staff accordingly rose and fell. It reached its nadir at the time of Constantine the Great on a coin[8-28] from Constantinople that pictures a Christian cross above a Roman standard; both rest on a low-lying serpent.

On a Pergamene coin [8-26] the staff and snake share the scene with a mouse. This is not as odd as it might seem on first glance when it is recalled that the Greeks and Romans relied heavily on imported grain for their food supply. Mice ate grain, dearth of grain often led to famine, and famines were frequently accompanied by diseases. The mouse thus became associated with Apollo Smintheus, as readers of the Iliad will recall. A fifth century B.C. coin[17-9] from Selinus in Sicily shows Apollo and Diana in a chariot; Apollo is aiming his bow and arrow at the spirit of the plague. The other side of this coin shows the god of the river Selinus bearing a thank offering to Aesculapius. This coin commemorates the project sponored by Empedocles to drain a large swamp by combining two rivers (one of which was the Selinus) and to strike a blow against the endemic malaria.

Coins were used not only to memorialize great acts by rulers but also to commemorate familial productivity. Marcus Aurelius had a silver denarius struck depicting his wife, Faustina, on one side,[21-50] and their two children on the other.[21-49] Faustina was a productive empress and Marcus Aurelius was a bit of a denarius-pincher, and this combination later produced a reminting of the same obverse with its striking portrait of Faustina but with a new reverse,[21-50] which now showed four children in charge of a suitably medical demigoddess, Fecunditas.

In addition to divine and human creatures, Greek and Roman coins also show medical equipment. Cupping glasses appear on several coins,[2-14] usually with either Aesculapius or Telesphoros.

Diseases were occasionally commemorated, and several examples date from the brief reign of Valerian (250-254 A.D.). There is some doubt about the real disease which the Romans then called the Cyprianic pest, but the best guess seems to be typhus.[15] The coins show Apollo holding a laurel branch in his right hand.

Many medical plants are depicted on ancient coins. Probably the most mysterious of these is silphium, a plant that was the numismatic trademark of Cyrene for three and a half centuries. Theophrastus wrote that silphium popped up de novo after a heavy thunderstorm, but there is good evidence that it was known before his time. Some authorities believe that silphium either was, or was closely related to, *Ferula tingitana*, in which case it still crops up in North Africa.

Fig. 5. Poppies had many medicinal uses. This combination of poppy heads and wheat ears is a charming mixture. Reproduced by permission from Bernhard, O.: *Griechische und Römische Münzbilder in ihren Beziehungen zur Geschichte der medizin.* Zurich, Füssli, 1926, Figure 225.

Cyrene used large quantities of silphium for both medicinal and condiment purposes. Gemmill has written informatively and enjoyably on the subject[5, 6] The plant first appeared on a Cyrenean coin about 600 B.C., and by the middle of the sixth century it had become solidly established on the country's coins.[8-30] In fact, the Cyreneans may have gone overboard on their promotion of silphium. A visitor to the area, Antiphanes, wrote (after he had left): "I want to say good-bye to Cyrene, to all horses, silphium, chariots, silphium stalks, steeple-chasers, silphium leaves, fevers, and silphium juice."

Hellebore is shown on a coin[8-33] from Pherae, and a pomegranate appears on a silver stater[1-227] from Side in Pamphylia. The pomegranate was used as a vermifuge and to assuage a variety of female pains. In addition to the medicinal appeal of this plant there is a typically Hellenic twist in that the Greek word for pomegranate was "sida."

The lily, useful to counteract burns, snake bites, and menstrual pains, is shown on a copper coin[1-228] from Syria. The poppy shows up several times, and may have created a problem in determining which side of the coin was "heads." An attractive design combining three poppy heads and four ears of wheat is depicted on a bronze coin[1-225] from the reign of Domitian (Figure 5).

In addition to official coins, a variety of unofficial coin-shaped items are pertinent to this subject. These tesserae were often worn around the neck to ward off diseases or, if put on too late, to cure them. An interesting example[16-1] from Ephesos (first century A.D.) shows the deer of Artemis in her role as guardian of health. The fact that so few tesserae still exist may be assigned to the same cause that makes our western pioneers' household "remedy books" so rare—they were used to the point of disintegration.

As a final example of this brief survey of the medical aspects of Greek and Roman coins may be cited a fascinating series discovered and described by Dr. Gerald D. Hart.[9] Parthia fought with Greeks and Romans for so many years that she can legitimately be included in a discussion of those two civilizations. For several centuries the kings of Parthia suffered from a small hereditary tumor which Dr. Hart suggests was probably a trichoepithelioma. Dr. Hart illustrated several examples of this tumor from current case histories, and compared the appearances of the tumor on the coins with those in current photographs. The results are striking. One of the monarchs, Volagases II (77-147 A.D.), was apparently vainer than the others. The first coins issued with his portrait show the usual tumor, but later issues have the tumor obscured by a conveniently handsome curl. If medicine concerns itself with both the abnormal and the normal here is a splendid numismatic example of a delightfully normal condition.

The references appended to this review have been selected both for their information and to provide material for those who would like to go further into this fascinating field.

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